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ABSTRACT

This article describes a course in life-span development designed particularly for students in counselor education programs. The description focuses on basic assumptions underlying the course plan, objectives of the course, and instructional methods and materials. Learning activities presented in detail include ones requiring students to: (1) describe how client characteristics at different age levels influence counseling practice; (2) explain how widely held attitudes in a society can influence counselees' problems; (3) obtain pertinent normative data from the professional literature; (4) define "normal development" in a suitable form for making counseling decisions; (5) select assessment methods appropriate for different age levels; and (6) engage in simulated counseling dialogues. The article concludes that each time the course was taught it became apparent that the age levels most students knew least about were those of childhood and old age, and the counseling techniques they knew most about were person-centered therapy, behavioral approaches, and educational guidance. It is noted that plans were made to strengthen knowledge and skills for working with children and the aged. (Author/ABL)

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A LIFE-SPAN DEVELOPMENT COURSE FOR COUNSELORS

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ABSTRACT

This article describes a course in life-span development designed particularly for students in counselor-education programs. The description focuses on basic assumptions underlying the course plan, objectives of the course, and instructional methods and materials. Learning activities presented in detail include ones requiring students to (1) describe how client characteristics at different age levels influence counseling practice, (2) how widely held attitudes in a society can influence counselees' problems, (3) obtain pertinent normative data from the professional literature, (4) define "normal development" in a suitable form for making counseling decisions, (5) select assessment methods appropriate for different age levels, and (6) engage in simulated counseling dialogues.

States' counselor-certification regulations and the curricula of counselor-education programs increasingly require that, in preparing for their profession, counselors complete a course in life-span development. Apparently this requirement is usually met by students enrolling in a class organized around a general human-development textbook. This is done with the expectation that counseling students can effectively apply to their professional problems the general knowledge gained in such a course. However, my acquaintance with such classes suggests that they fall short in two ways of efficiently meeting counselors' needs. First, some of the topics they include are of little or no use in counseling situations. Second, they fail to illustrate how information about development can directly aid counselors with their decision-making responsibilities.

In view of these shortcomings of general life-span classes, the faculty in counseling education at our institution established a class entitled *Life-Span Development and Counseling Decisions* to fulfill local program needs and state-certification requirements for knowledge of human development. The purpose of this article is to describe basic assumptions, objectives, activities, and learning materials created for the course over its first two years of operation.

Four Basic Assumptions

An initial assumption underlying the program plan was that while every counseling client is unique, it is also true that in many ways each client is similar to certain others. It is the counselor's prior knowledge of these similarities that helps guide decisions about how best to work with each new counselee. Statements about the similarities among people are normative descriptions telling what characteristics are typical for a group of people who are defined by some variable. In the case of a class in life-span development, the key variable is age.

Although age is a significant variable, age alone is not nearly so significant for counseling as is the interaction of age with such factors as gender, cultural background, and the types of problems clients present. The variable *types of problems* is important because some difficulties that clients suffer occur more frequently at one stage of life than at another. Furthermore, gender is often related to social/psychological difficulties that people encounter at different age levels. In addition, the expectations held within a culture regarding proper behavior for different age periods are frequently involved in the problems clients bring to the counselor's office. (The term *culture* in this context refers to a group of people's shared goals, values, and patterns of living that differentiate members of that group from members of other groups. The basis for groups' cultural differences

can be religious, ethnic, regional, language usage, social class, or the like.)

The professional literature in the fields of human development and counseling is rich in theory and empirical studies about interrelationships among age, gender, certain cultural characteristics, and types of client problems. Thus, there is a large body of information from which to draw the content of a life-span class. Such data assist the therapist by reducing an infinite number of possibilities about the nature of the client to a limited set of probabilities. In other words, normative information can give sharper focus to the therapist's estimate about clients' problems and about clients' potentials for solving those problems.

A second assumption was that normative descriptions cannot tell what a particular counselee is "really like", since each person is indeed unique. Hence, while descriptive group data can suggest questions to pose and areas of counselees' lives to investigate, the success of treating any case depends ultimately on how artfully the counselor discovers —by means of interviews, observations, tests, and intuition— how the variables in each client's life are woven together to form that person's pattern of individuality.

A third assumption proposed that a course in life-span development cannot hope to equip counselors with more than a small portion of the normative information useful in counseling. Therefore, students should also derive from the course the skills needed to locate additional pertinent information when a particular type of client's problem is encountered.

A fourth assumption was that the information and skills taught in the course will transfer most effectively to counseling practice if class activities go beyond the level of passive understanding. that is, class activities should engage students in frequent active application of the course content to counseling problems.

Course Objectives

In keeping with the foregoing assumptions, the general objectives of the class became the following. The class should equip students to:

1. Identify those points in the counseling process at which normative data about life-span development will enhance the efficiency of counseling.

2. Tell which types of normative information are useful at different stages of counseling, explain why such data are useful, and demonstrate their application in typical counseling cases.

3. Describe limitations of normative information for counseling with individuals and groups.

4. Describe characteristics of different counseling approaches and suggest which approaches might be most appropriate at different age levels for different kinds of client problems.

5. Demonstrate in specific counseling cases how normative information might interact with a counselor's characteristics (age, gender, cultural traits, skills) to influence the conduct of counseling.

6. Identify useful sources of life-span information and extract from those sources the kinds of data most pertinent to particular counseling cases.

7. Distinguish between *normal development* as statistical frequency and *normal development* as desirable growth and adjustment; and describe how this distinction can influence counseling practice.

Instructional Methods and Materials

At the time the course was newly introduced, we failed to find a textbook that directly suited our purposes. General life-span texts were not linked closely enough to counseling; and among the few available texts intended for counselors, none treated the issues in the manner we desired. (I have since written a textbook for the class —*Counseling Over the Life Span,* Sage Publications, 1989.) Therefore, over the first two years we created the materials needed for the learning activities. The numbers in brackets at the end of each of the following activities identify which of the general objectives that activity was intended to accomplish.

Age-Characteristics Summaries

Nearly every week the class focused on a different age level, beginning with prenatal development and ending with old age. Thus, each week class members received a summary of age characteristics for the growth stage under discussion, along with descriptions of typical kinds of counseling cases at that stage. The summaries described physical, cognitive (language), social, emotional, gender, and cultural aspects of development. Types of counseling cases mentioned with the descriptions are illustrated by the following kinds accompanying the first age period —prenatal to age 5.

—Pregnant women who wish to learn how their own behavior during pregnancy may affect the development of the unborn child they carry.

—Parents seeking to learn what to expect of their young child and wanting to know what child-raising practices are best during the rapidly changing periods of growth during these years.

—Parents distressed by the way children in the family act toward each other. Sometimes this is a case of sibling rivalry. But increasingly, as divorce rates rise, more children of divorced parents are cast into new family constellations as their parent remarries and the new spouse brings a strange set of children to live with them.

—A child's parents or guardians, accused of child neglect or abuse, who are sent by the court or a friend for counseling.

—A child whose development is judged as deficient, so the child is taken to a therapist for help.

Class members were asked (1) to identify which information in the summaries could be important in each type of case, (2) what additional normative data might be useful, and (3) where such data might be obtained [1, 2, 6].

Social-Attitudes Reports

Students were provided summaries of survey-poll results from various editions of *The Gallup Report*. The surveys treated a wide range of topics —drug and alcohol abuse, teenage pregnancy, AIDS and AIDS testing, unemployment, conflicts between teenagers and their parents, poverty, religious preferences, homosexuality, pornography, and sexual morality. Class members were divided into pairs, with each pair responsible for carrying out the following assignment and preparing a precis of their decisions that could be reported later to the entire class.

For each set of Gallup-poll data:

1. Can you conceive of any types of clients and their presenting problems for which this set of data would be of value to a counselor? If so, what are those types of clients and their problems?
2. For each type of client, in what way might the data aid the counselor in estimating:
   - 2.1 The incidence of this kind of problem for the client's age group?
   - 2.2 The frequency with which the reported societal attitudes might have contributed to the client's problem?
   - 2.3 How the options available to the client for solving or adjusting to the problem might be affected by such attitudes?
   - 2.4 The types of questions or comments the counselor could profitably use during the counseling sessions?
   - 2.5 Whether the counselor should keep the normative data to herself or himself or, instead, should pass the data on to the client in some form?
   - 2.6 Whether the age of the client will influence answers to items 2.2 through 2.5?
   - 2.7 What other kinds of attitude information bearing on this type of case would be useful to a counselor, why, and where might it be found? [2 , 3, 4, 5, 6]

Professional-Literature Search

On five occasions during the course, students were assigned to prepare a summary of normative information about a type of client problem often met during the age-stage currently under discussion. Students were provided the following directions.

The dual purpose of this activity is to aid you in (1) identifying kinds of life-stage information that can enhance the effectiveness of your counseling and (2) adopting efficient methods for locating such information in the literature on human development and on counseling. The assignment consists of seven steps:

1. Select a type of client you might meet in your present or future counseling practice. The term *type* means a person identified (1) by the problem that brings the individual for counseling, (2) by age level and, if you wish, (3) by gender and/or by one or more cultural characteristics.

2. Define the client and problem in a manner so clear that a novice counselor could recognize such a client by the symptoms or characteristics you describe.

3. List key words (descriptors) that can serve as guides in your search for information in the professional literature.

4. Use your key words as guides as you hunt through the professional literature to locate normative information useful in counseling such a client.

5. Summarize the normative information you located and identify your sources of information.

6. Describe the ways in which the material presented at Step 5 could be useful to a counselor.

7. Explain any shortcomings of the data at Step 5 and/or cautions you would recommend in using such data to establish expectations regarding a counselee of the type identified at Steps 1 and 2.

As an example to how such a completed summary might look, at the time of the first literature-search assignment the students were furnished a sample report focusing on the problem of bereavement in middle age. On each day that a literature-search assignment was to be handed in, every student gave the class a brief oral summary of his or her findings. A typical report covered two or three single-spaced, typed pages. At the end of the course, the students had the entire collection of summaries photocopied and bound so that each person would have the results of their classmates' literature search [2, 3, 6].

Conceptions of Normality

Students were furnished a position paper distinguishing between the term *normal* (or *abnormal*) development as "statistical similarity or frequency" and *normal* (or *abnormal*) as "desirable development" or at least as "acceptable development." The paper also analyzed uses of the term *natural*, as in the remark "It's just a stage that kids this age normally pass through, so the problem will naturally clear up" —a remark implying that the client's condition will change without anything special being done to intervene.

With the position paper as a guide, class members were assigned to provide written answers to the following questions:

1. What is your definition of normal development in the sense of desirable, acceptable, or satisfactory development?

2. What is your rationale in support of the components of your definition?

3. What sorts of evidence would a counselor need in order to make a decision about the normality of a client's development from the perspective of your definition?

4. Which parts of this evidence represent normative information (statistical evidence) and which parts represent information about the individual client?

5. For an illustrative case you describe, what specific type (or types) or normative information would you want (if any) and where might you obtain this information [2, 3, 6 , 7].

Suitable Assessment Techniques

As a means of centering students' attention on the selection of assessment methods appropriate to a client's age period and type of problem, class members were funrished an extensive list of evaluation techniques, including various kinds of tests, records that a counselor might consult, and observations of the client. The class was then divided into groups of three. Each group was given descriptions of seven hypothetical counseling cases covering seven age stages. The assignment was to write answers to the following quesitons for each case.

1. At what junctures in this case might a counselor wish to carry out an assessment? What goal —or goals— would such an assessment be expected to achieve? That is, what purpose would the assessment serve?
2. At each juncture, what assessment technique —or techniques— might reasonably be used? Why would this technique be more suitable than others in view of the goal, the client's probem, and the client's developmentl stage?
3. If the techhnique proposed at Step 2 is not a published test or inventory, how would you develop the instrument or the approach? Please give a specific example.

At the close of the small-group sessions, the class met as a unit to hear each group report one decision they had reached which they believed might be of interest to other members of the class. The written answers from the group session were collected by the instructor for review.

Simulated Dialogue 1

To advance students' skills in moving from the general and theoretical to the specific and practical, class members were assigned the homework task of generating a simulated dialogue for a typical case at the age-level currently under study. The exercise required that the counselor explain the rationale underlying each step that he or she took in the interchange with the client. Directions

for carrying out the assignment were as follows:

> At the top of a sheet of paper, briefly describe (a) who the people will be in the dialogue segment, (b) the counseling setting (your office, a group-therapy session, the client's home, a telephone conversation), and (c) the problem presented by the client. Below this introduction, divide the paper into two columns. Label the left column *Dialogue* and the right column *Commentary*. In the left column, write the dialogue as you conceive it might develop between you and the client (or clients). In the right column, parallel to each portion of the dialogue, tell what considerations underlie the way you are guiding the interview or responding to the client. Include in your commentary those aspects of the client's stage of life and presenting problem that influence your counseling approach. Your commentary can focus on such conditions as the client's abilities, freedom of action as influenced by environmental constraints, and motives or interests. The commentary can also address the way your your own counseling skills, your stage of life (as compared with that of the client), your gender, and your cultural characteristics would influence your counseling behavior [2, 4, 5].

To illustrate the form such dialogues might assume, when the assignment was issued the students received two sample segments of simulated interviews, one involving a painfully shy kindergarten child and the other a junior-high shoplifter.

Simulated Dialogue 2

In the foregoing simulated dialogue, the student had complete control over both the client's and counselor's roles. Simulated dialogue 2 became more realistic by placing the control of the client's role in someone else's hands. The exercise consisted of dividing the class into pairs. Within each pair, one student received Case A and the other student Case B. At the top of the assignment sheet, the case was described in terms of the client's age, sex, occupation or place in school, and presenting problem. Below the description, the sheet was divided into two columns, the left for the dialogue and the right for the counselor's rationale. The case opened with the client entering the counselor's office. At that point the written exercise began, with the student —in the assumed role of counselor— writing in the dialogue column what the counselor would say first. Then, in the commentary column the student explained why she or he employed such an opening.

After this introductory counselor statement, the two students who formed the pair exchanged assignment sheets, and each now assumed the client role, writing in the dialogue column a response to the counselor's opening remarks. The papers were then returned to the original counselor who next inserted what he or she would respond in reacting to the client's behavior. And a rationale for this response was written in the right column. Again, the pair of participants exchanged papers. And in such a manner the exercise continued, with the papers exchanged back and forth as the

members of each pair alternately assumed the roles of counselor and client, seeking to simulate a realistic situation in which the counselor is unable to predict with certainty the client's reaction at each step of the dialogue.

The written dialogues resulting from this exercise were then exchanged among other class members who offered their appraisals and asked questions to clarify issues raised by the dialogues [2, 4, 5].

Simulated Dialogue 3

The third type of dialogue involved students once more working in pairs. This time the exercise was entirely oral, with one student acting as a counselor and the other as a client. The client was given a sheet describing his or her age, presenting problem, gender, and certain social/cultural conditions (family, ethnic background, religion, socioeconomic status, occupation, and the like). However, the counselor was told only the client's age and gender. It was then the counselor's task in this initial interview (1) to discover the nature of client's presenting problem, (2) to identify pertinent social/cultural characteristics of the client, and (3) to begin diagnosing and treating the case. After the interview had developed for some time, the pair stopped the exercise to analyze what had occurred [1, 2, 3 ,4 ,5].

As a variation of this approach, a third person can be added to the pair to serve as an observer. The observer's task is to (1) comment at the close of the dialogue on the apparent suitability of the counselor's approach to the age-stage, gender, and cultural characteristics of the client and (2) ask the counselor to explain the rationale behind the counselor's behavior at different steps in the interview.

Conclusion

The success of the foregoing activities was evaluated principally by tmy appraising students' written assignments according to criteria that had been presented to class members at the time each assignment was given. With rare exception, students exhibited a highly satisfactory command of the knowledge and skills that the assignments required.

Each time the course was taught, it became apparent that the age levels most students knew least about were those of childhood and old age. Students were typically best acquainted with the periods of late adolescence and early adulthood. Furthermore, the counseling techniques they knew most about when they entered the class were those of person-centered therapy, behavioral approaches, and educational guidance. Thus, for the future, plans were laid to add activities aimed

at strengthening knowledge and skills for working with children and the aged. The activities would include analyzing videotapes of counseling sessions featuring play therapy and projective techniques with children and biographical review with the elderly.

(The first year the course was offered, Prof. Gale Morrison and I taught the class together. I wish to acknowledge her valuable contributions.)